

The Sure Foundation and the Keys of
the Kingdom

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“He saith unto them, that whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” *Matthew 16:15-19.SFKK 3.1*

Two expressions in this passage, namely, “on this rock I will build my church,” and, “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” have been the object of a great deal of controversy, and they often seriously trouble those who take no stock in the arguments for papal authority, which the Catholics try to draw from them. It is the object of this little study to focus the light of inspiration upon them, that they may be explained, “not in the words which man’s wisdom, teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.” *SFKK 3.2*

First, as to the rock upon which the church of Christ is built. Is that rock the apostle Peter? Or is it something else? That it is not Peter, may be proved both by the text itself, and by the concurrent testimony of Scripture. It is doubtless well known that the proper name Peter signifies a stone. When Jesus first saw Simon, he said to him, “Thou art Simon the son of Jona; thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone,” or Peter. *John 1:42*. But perhaps it is not so generally known that the Greek word for Peter is entirely different from that which in *Matthew 16:18* is translated rock. Of the former, *petra*, Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon says: “A piece of rock, a stone, and thus distinguished from *petra*.” This latter word, *petra*, is the word rendered “rock,” and of this Liddell and Scott say, “A rock generally, whether peaked or ridged, Latin, *petra*,” which is defined as a crag. A passage in Pindar is there referred to, where the word occurs in the plural, *petrai*, where loose stones (*petros*) are not meant, but “masses of living rock torn up.” *SFKK 4.1*

Now with these facts before us, who can say that Peter is the rock

on which the church is built? He is a stone; but the church is not built on so unstable a foundation. Peter was a man of power, and was a mighty instrument in the hands of God to help build up the church; but it would never do to build that church upon a foundation which could waver in the least; and Peter at one time, long after this, wavered so greatly that Paul was obliged to rebuke him to the face. *Galatians 2:11-14*. A fearless man of God was Peter, yet only a fallible mortal. The church is built on a rock, a crag, on something that is fixed. The difference in the terms is alone sufficient to show that the apostle Peter is not the foundation of the church. *SFKK 4.2*

Let us now see upon what, according to the inspired word, the church of Christ is actually built. In *1 Corinthians 10:4*, we are told that the Israelites in the wilderness all drank the same spiritual drink; “for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed went with them; and that Rock [*petra*] was Christ.” See also *Psalms 18:2; 92:15*. *SFKK 5.1*

In *Ephesians 2:20* we are taken a step farther. There the converted Gentiles are told that being now fellow-citizens with the saints, they are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone.” This shows that Christ is the Rock upon which the church is built, as *1 Corinthians 10:4* shows that he is the Rock from which it derives its nourishment. If it be imagined from the wording of *Ephesians 2:20*, that the apostles are a part of the foundation, even then Peter is deprived of the position which the Catholic Church would give him as the sole foundation, the “apostles and prophets” being all included. But we shall see that the apostle does not mean that the apostles and prophets are a part of the foundation, but that the church is built upon the foundations upon which the apostles and prophets built, and which they, in a sense, laid. Thus, we read in *1 Corinthians 3:10-13*:—*SFKK 5.2*

“According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay stubble; every man’s work shall be

made manifest.” *SFKK 6.1*

Christ, then, and not Peter, is the foundation upon which the church is built. This will be seen more plainly still when it is remembered that the church existed in the wilderness of Sinai hundreds of years before the day of Peter. See *Acts 7:38*. When Moses identified himself with this church, he incurred the reproach of Christ. *Hebrews 11:25, 26*. The Rock from which they drank was the Rock upon which they were built. *SFKK 6.2*

In this connection it is interesting and profitable to note the words of Christ in closing the sermon on the mount. Having given his instruction, he said:—*SFKK 6.3*

“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock. And everyone that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall of it.” *Matthew 7:24-27. SFKK 6.4*

Here we learn how it is that we may build upon Christ, the Rock. It is by obeying his words. “The words that I speak unto you,” said Jesus, “they are spirit, and they are life.” *John 6:63*. His words are divine, like himself, whether uttered with his own voice, or by the mouth of a prophet. In fact, Christ dwells in the word; for we read that he dwells in our heart by faith (*Ephesians 3:17*), and “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” *Romans 10:17*. By receiving the words of Christ, therefore, we receive Christ himself; and so by building upon those words, we build upon Christ. The members of Christ’s true church, therefore, are those in whom the word of Christ dwells richly. *SFKK 7.1*

To build upon the words of Christ is to believe them so thoroughly that they are made a part of the life, and the mainspring of every action. When it is said that Abraham “believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (*Genesis 15:6*), the full meaning conveyed by the Hebrew is that Abraham *built upon God*. The same

idea is found in *2 Chronicles 20:20*, where we have the words of Joshua, “Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper.” In reality he exhorted them to build upon the Lord, if they would be established; and contrariwise we have the words of Isaiah to Ahaz, that because he would not build upon the words of God, he should not be established. *Isaiah 7:9*. Compare these two texts with *Matthew 7:24-27*. Abraham built upon God, by doing just as God commanded him; for James tells us that Abraham’s obedience to the command to offer up Isaac was the fulfillment of the scripture which said, “Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.” *James 2:23.SFKK 7.2*

Applying all this to the text under consideration, we see the force of Christ’s words. Peter, speaking for the twelve, said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Christ in saying, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church,” puts himself, as the Rock of Ages, in direct contrast with Peter. As he said that whosoever should do his words would be building on the rock, so the church is built upon the acknowledgment of Christ as the Son of the living God. Not simple lip acknowledgment, but the acknowledgment of obedience.*SFKK 8.1*

The matter is made very plain in the following beautiful passage by the apostle Peter himself:—*SFKK 8.2*

“Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby; if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious; and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.” *1 Peter 2:1-6.SFKK 8.3*

Compare this with *Ephesians 2:19-22*, and it will be seen that the very same testimony is borne by both Peter and Paul. Peter made no pretensions to being the head over the church. He wrote to the

elders as one of them (*1 Peter 5:10*), and referred to Christ as “the chief corner-stone” upon which the church is built. Each individual, as he comes to Christ, the living stone, is made into a living stone, so that the whole superstructure is of the same nature as the foundation.*SFKK 8.4*

We have now to study *verse 19*; but first we must notice the statement, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The word “hell,” *hades*, means the grave, as it is correctly rendered in the Revised Version. How is it that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church? The idea is not that of warfare, for gates do not fight and overcome; but gates can shut people in, and close so tightly as to prevent any that are inside from escaping, and thus prevail against them. Gates are a symbol of power, as possessing the gate of one’s enemies (*Genesis 22:17*) signifies victory over them. The meaning of the text is that the gates of the grave shall not prevail against the church of Christ.*SFKK 9.1*

Why not?—Because it is built upon him. It is firmly fastened to him, so that the foundation and the superstructure are one. Therefore whatever befalls the foundation, must likewise come to the building. The foundation in this instance occupies the same relation to the building that the head does to the body; and whatever the head shares, the body shares with it. Where the head goes, the body goes. The members of the church are joint heirs with Christ. Now Christ announces himself as the one that liveth and was dead, but is alive forevermore, and has the keys of the grave and of death. *Revelation 1:18*. Death and the grave were not able to hold Christ. *Acts 2:24*. Therefore they cannot hold those who are built upon and united to him. Because he lives, they shall live also. This is consistent with the idea that Christ is the resurrection and the life. The grave is only an incident in the lives of those who are his; it has no power over them. But this confident language could not be used if Peter were the foundation of the church. He could not save even himself, but, like all other mortals, is dependent upon Christ for life.*SFKK 9.2*

“And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in

heaven.”*SFKK 10.1*

The first thing to consider is what constitutes the keys of the kingdom of heaven. A key is that which unlocks or locks; it is anything by which we gain access to any place, or which enables us to understand any given thing. Now what is it that opens heaven to mankind, and enables us to understand God?—Evidently the gospel, and nothing else. Paul says that Christ has “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” *2 Timothy 1:10*. Immortality stands for all heavenly blessings, as it comprises all. It is the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*SFKK 10.2*

Christ declares himself to be “he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.” *Revelation 3:7*. In *Isaiah 55:3, 4*, we read: “Incline your ear, and come unto me; hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people.” The sure mercies of David are the blessings which are assured to us through Christ, the Son of David.*SFKK 10.3*

While the gospel opens the kingdom of heaven to men, it also shuts out those who reject it. The apostle Paul says: “Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savor of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish; to the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life.” *2 Corinthians 3:14-16*. Thus the gospel opens and shuts.*SFKK 11.1*

It seems plain, therefore, that when Christ said, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” he referred to the gospel, which he was about to commit to Peter and his associates. But how about their binding and loosing on earth, and it being bound or loosed in heaven? A text in Jeremiah will help us to understand this. In the record of the calling of the prophet, we read: “Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to

pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”
Jeremiah 1:9, 10.SFKK 11.2

Jeremiah was only a man, yet he was clothed with wonderful power. As strong language was used concerning him as was spoken to Peter. Now how was he to root out kingdoms, and to pull down and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant them?—Simply by the word of the Lord which he should speak. A prophet is simply the mouth-piece of God. He utters nothing of himself, but only as God speaks through him, and yet he maintains his individuality, so that the words are his own. It is all of man and all of God. The words of the man are also the words of God, and so whatever the man utters on earth, are the decrees of heaven. Whatever he binds or looses on earth, is bound or loosed in heaven.*SFKK 12.1*

It was the same with the apostles. On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came on them, they began to speak, with tongues, “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” We have before quoted the statement of Paul, that in making known the gospel he spoke, “not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.” *1 Corinthians 2:13*. The same word of God, which was given to Jeremiah and Isaiah, was committed to the apostles. Peter, after quoting from Isaiah the statement that “all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away; but the word of the Lord endureth forever,” adds: “And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.” *1 Peter 1:24, 25*. Therefore just as Jeremiah, as the spokesman for God, could tear down and build up nations, so the apostles, with the words of Christ in their mouths, could bind and loose, according to the will of heaven.*SFKK 12.2*

The acts of men in such cases were not the acts of men, but of God. Men were simply the mouth-pieces of his righteous decrees.*SFKK 13.1*

But how about the words of Christ being addressed directly to Peter? There is no question but that Peter occupied a prominent place among the apostles. He was a natural leader, and often spoke for the others. Moreover, he was a pioneer in gospel work. In

the council at Jerusalem he said: “Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.” *Acts 15:7*. But although he was the first one to preach to the Gentiles, his special work was among the Jews, as we read from Paul, concerning this same council:—*SFKK 13.2*

“When they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter (for he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles); they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.” *Galatians 2:7-9*. *SFKK 13.3*

Here we find that a special dispensation of the gospel was committed to Peter, even as unto Paul. But this did not constitute him the sole guardian of the doors of heaven. As one to whom the gospel was specially intrusted, he did most certainly have the keys of the kingdom of heaven in his possession; but this special commission he shared with Paul, and to Paul was given the greater work. So they keys of the kingdom of heaven were committed to Paul as well as to Peter, and in a greater measure, since he “labored more abundantly than they all.” *1 Corinthians 15:10*. And not only were the keys given to Peter and Paul, as pioneers in the great work of the gospel, but to all their associates, who received the same divine commission (*Matthew 28:19, 20*); and not only to the apostles, but to the prophets, who declared the word of the Lord. And so the church, which is the house of the living God, stands not upon any one man, nor upon any company of men, but “on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone,” and the entire foundation. *SFKK 13.4*

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